

The Hollow of Her Hand

by George Barr McCutcheon

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CHAPTER XIX.

The Hollow of Her Hand.

When Booth called in the afternoon at Sara's apartment, he was met by the news that she was quite ill and could see no one—not even him. The doctor had been summoned during the night and had returned in the morning, to find that she had a very high temperature. The butler could not enlighten Booth further than this, except to add that a nurse was coming in to take charge of Mrs. Randall, more for the purpose of watching her symptoms than for anything else, he believed. At least, so the doctor had said.

Two days passed before the distressed young man could get any definite news concerning her condition. He unconsciously began to think of it as a malady, not a mere illness, due of course to a remark Carroll had dropped when Sara had told him the whole truth of the tragedy and of her own vindictive plans. It was Carroll himself who gave a definite report of Sara. He met the lawyer coming away from the apartment when he called to inquire.

"She isn't out of her head, or anything like that," said Carroll uneasily, "but she's in a bad way, Booth. I'll tell you what I think is troubling her more than anything else. Down in her heart she realizes that Hetty Castleton has got to be brought face to face with the Wrاندalls."

"The deuce you say!"

"Today I saw her for the first time. Almost immediately she asked me if I thought the Wrاندalls would treat Hetty fairly if they ever found out the truth about her. I said I thought they would. I didn't have the heart to tell her that her grievance undoubtedly would be shifted from Hetty to her, and that they wouldn't be likely to forgive her for the stand she'd taken. She doesn't seem to care, however, what the Wrاندalls think of her. By the way, have you any influence over Hetty Castleton?"

"I wish I were sure that I had," said Booth.

"Do you think she would come if you sent her a cablegram?"

"I am going over."

"She will have your letter in a couple of days, according to Sara, who seems to have a very faithful correspondent in the person of that maid. I shudder to think of the cable tolls in the past few months! I sometimes wonder if the maid suspects anything more than a loving interest in Miss Castleton. What I was about to suggest is this: Couldn't you cable her on Friday saying that Sara is very ill? This is Tuesday."

"I will cable, of course, but Sara must not know that I've done it."

"Can you come to my office tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes. Tomorrow night I shall go to Philadelphia, to be gone till Friday. I hope it will not be necessary for me to stay longer. You never can tell about these operations."

"I trust everything will go well, Randolph."

"A few things of note transpired on Friday."

The Wrاندalls arrived from Europe, without the recalcitrant colonel, Mr. Redmond Wrاندall, who met them the dock, heaved a sigh of relief.

"He will be over on the Lusitania," said Leslie, who for no reason best known to himself ordered a troubled look.

Mr. Wrاندall's face fell. "I hope so," he said, much to the indignation

the motor that whirled them across town.

"By the way, my dear," he said to his wife, a trifle irrelevantly, "don't you think it would be right for you and Vivian to drop in this afternoon and see Sara? Just to let her know that she isn't without—"

"It's out of the question, Redmond," said his wife, a shocked expression in her face as much as to say that he must be quite out of his head to suggest such a thing. "We shall be dreadfully busy for several days, unpacking and—well, doing all sorts of necessary things."

"She is pretty sick, I hear," mumbled he.

"Hasn't she got a nurse?" demanded his wife.

"I merely offered the suggestion in order—"

"Well, we'll see her next week. Any other news?"

"Mrs. Booth, Brandon's mother, was operated on for something or other day before yesterday."

"Oh, dear! The poor thing! Where?"

"Philadelphia, of course."

"I wonder if—let me see, Leslie, isn't there a good train to Philadelphia at four o'clock? I could go—"

"Really, my dear," said her husband sharply.

"You forget how busy we are, mother," said Vivian, without a smile.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Wrاندall, in considerable confusion. "Was it a serious operation, Redmond?"

"They cut a bone out of her nose, that's all. Brandon says her heart is weak. They were afraid of the ether. She's all right, Carroll says."

"Goodness!" cried Mrs. Wrاندall. One might have suspected a note of disappointment in her voice.

"I shall go up to see Sara this afternoon," said Vivian calmly. "What's the number of her new apartment?"

"You have been up to see her, of course," said Mrs. Wrاندall acidly.

He fidgeted. "I didn't hear of her illness until yesterday."

"I'll go up with you, Viv," said Leslie.

"No, you won't," said his sister flatly. "I'm going to apologize to her for something I said to Brandon Booth. You needn't tag along, Les."

At half-past five in the afternoon, the Wrاندall limousine stopped in front of the tall apartment building near the park, a footman jerked open the door, and Miss Wrاندall stepped out. At the same moment a telegraph messenger boy paused on the sidewalk, numbing on the imposing grilles of the building.

Miss Wrاندall had herself announced by the obsequious doorman, and stood by in patience to wait for the absurd rule of the house to be carried out. "No one could get in without being announced from below," said the doorman.

"I'm in all right, all right," said the messenger boy, "I got a telegram for you today."

"Go to the rear!" exclaimed the doorman, with some energy.

While Miss Wrاندall waited in Sara's reception hall on the tenth floor, the messenger, having traversed a more devious route, arrived with his message.

Watson took the envelope and told him to wait. Five minutes passed. Miss Wrاندall grew very uncomfortable under the persistent though complimentary gaze of the street urchin. He stared at her, wide-eyed and admiring, his tribute to the glorious. She stared back occasionally, narrow-eyed and reproving, her tribute to the grotesque.

"Will you please step into the drawing-room, Miss Wrاندall," said Watson, returning. He led her across the small foyer and threw open a door. She passed into the room beyond.

Then he turned to the boy who stood beside the hall seat, making change for a quarter as he approached.

"Here," he said, handing him the receipt book and a dime, "that's for you." He dropped the quarter into his own pocket, where it mingled with coins that were strangers to it up to that instant, and imperiously closed the door behind the boy who failed to say "thank you." Every man to his trade!

There was a woman in the drawing-room when Vivian entered, standing well over against the windows with her back to the light. The visitor stopped short in surprise. She had expected to find her sister-in-law in bed, attended by a politely superior person in pure white.

"Why, Sara," she began, "I am so glad to see you are up and—"

The other woman came forward. "But I am not Sara, Miss Wrاندall," she said, in a well-remembered voice. "How do you do?"

Vivian found herself looking into the face of Hetty Castleton. Instantly she extended her hand.

"This is a surprise!" she exclaimed. "When did you return? Leslie told me your plans were quite settled when he saw you in Lucerne. Oh, I see! Of course! How stupid of me. Sara sent for you."

"She has been quite ill," said Hetty, non-committally. "We got in yesterday. I thought my place was here, naturally."

"Naturally," repeated Vivian, in a detached sort of way. "How is she today? May I see her?"

"She is very much better. In fact, she is sitting up in her room. A warm flush suffused her face, a shy smile appeared in her eyes. "She is receiving two gentlemen visitors, to be perfectly honest, Miss Wrاندall, her lawyer, Mr. Carroll, and—Mr. Booth."

They were seated side by side on the uncomfortable Louis Seize divan in the middle of the room.

"Perhaps she won't care to see me, after an audience so fatiguing," said Miss Wrاندall sweetly. "And so exasperating," she added, with a smile. Hetty looked her perplexity.

"But she will see you, Miss Wrاندall—if you don't mind waiting. It is a business conference they're having."

An ironic gleam appeared in the corner of Vivian's eye. "Oh," she said, and waited. Hetty smiled uncertainly. All at once the tall American girl was impressed by the wistful, almost humble look in the Englishwoman's eyes, an appealing look that caused her to wonder not a little. Like a flash she jumped at an obvious conclusion, and almost caught her breath. This girl loved Booth and was losing him! Vivian exulted for a moment and then, with an impulse she could not quite catalogue, laid her hand on the other's slim fingers, and murmured somewhat hazily: "Never mind, never mind!"

"Oh, you must wait," cried Hetty, not at all in touch with the other's mood. "Sara expects to see you. The men will be out in a few minutes."

"I think I will run in tomorrow morning," said Vivian hastily. She arose almost immediately and again

wasn't very clear about it himself. Then Hetty broke down and cried, confessing that she was eager to go to Mrs. Wrاندall, at the same time sobbing about something about a symbolic dicky-bird, much to Mr. Carroll's wonder and perplexity.

He sent the maid from the room, and retired with Miss Castleton to the innermost of his private offices, where without much preamble he informed her that he knew everything. Moreover, Mr. Booth was in possession of all the facts and was even then on the point of starting for Europe to see her. Of course, his letter had failed to reach her in time. There was quite a tragic scene in the seclusion of that remote little office, during which Mr. Carroll wiped his eyes and blew his nose more than once, after which he took it upon himself to dispatch a messenger to Sara with the word that he and Miss Castleton would present themselves within half an hour after his note had been delivered.

The meeting between Sara and Hetty was affecting. . . . Almost immediately the former began to show the most singular signs of improvement. She laughed and cried and joyously announced to the protesting nurse that she was feeling quite well again! And, in truth, she got up from the couch on which she reclined and insisted on being dressed for dinner.

In another room the amazed nurse was frankly appealing to Mr. Carroll to let her send for the doctor, only to be confounded by his urbane announcement that Mrs. Wrاندall was as "right as a string" and, please God, she wouldn't need the services of doctor or nurse again for years to come. Then he asked the nurse if she had ever heard of a disease called "nostalgia."

She said she had heard of "homesickness."

"Well, that's what ailed Mrs. Wrاندall," he said. "Miss Castleton is the cure."

Booth came the next morning. . . . Even as she lay passive in his arms, Hetty denied him. Her arms were around his neck as she miserably whispered that she could not, would not be his wife, notwithstanding her love for him and his readiness to accept her as she was. She was obdurate, lovingly, tenderly obdurate. He had despaired but for Sara, to whom he afterwards appealed.

"Wait," was all that Sara had said, but he took heart. He was beginning to look upon her as a sorceress. A week ago he had felt sorry for her; his heart had been touched by her transparent misery. Today he saw her in another light altogether; as the determined, resourceful, calculating woman who, having failed to attain a certain end, was now intensely, keenly interested in the development of another of a totally different nature. He could not feel sorry for her today. Hetty deliberately had placed herself in their hands, withdrawing from the conference shortly before Vivian's arrival to give herself over to gloomy conjectures as to the future, not only for herself, but for the man she loved and the woman she worshipped with something of the fidelity of a beaten dog.

At a later conference participated in by Sara, Booth and Mr. Carroll, the old lawyer spoke plainly.

"Now are you both willing to give serious consideration to the plan I propose? Take time to think it over. No harm will come to Miss Castleton. I am confident. There will be a nine days' session, but after all, it is the best thing for everybody. You propose living abroad, Booth, so what are the odds if—"

"I can't live abroad unless Hetty reconsiders her decision to not marry me," said the young man dismally.

"Gad, Sara, you must convince her that I love her better than—"

NOT IN ALL THINGS GROSS

Mechanical the Age May Be, But It Has the Best of the Spirit of the Past.

Ours, says a veteran theater manager gloomily, is a mechanical age, in which less and less is left to the human factor, to originality, individuality and the spirit. Ours is, indeed, a mechanical age, but it is not an age that dispenses or is at all likely to dispense with charm, beauty and the things of the spirit. To the broader vision—like that of Wells—a mechanical age is an age "set free," an age that has more time for study, contemplation and right living. There is no reason why vulgarity and gross materialism should capture the wonderful mechanical devices of the age; and there is plenty of evidence that "the spirit" is busy trying to utilize the same devices. Automatic players have brought music—and good music, too—into tens of thousands of homes in small towns and rural districts. The movies are doing wonders. They will soon become an adjunct of every school, museum and cultural agency. They will democratize science. They will make "dry" studies attractive. They will steadily elevate the standards of popular entertainment, annexing the spheres of romance, adventure and beauty. Our mechanical age enables polar explorers to take music along with them, but has it killed the spirit of polar explorations? Our age has given us aeroplanes, but has it destroyed the spirit of the airman? In our age deficient in courage, benevolence, appreciation of natural wonders and the finer achievements of

man? Knowledge and invention shall make us freer, and freedom from too monotonous, grinding toil will make us more truly human, more truly social and civilized.

What Came Up.

An Englishman was driving around County Tipperary one warm day, when he came across a farmer setting potatoes. Thinking to have a joke with him, he began:

"Well, Pat, what are you planting?"

"Praties, sir," said Pat.

"Do you think potatoes will come up?" asked the Englishman.

"Of course," said Pat.

"Why, I set onions last year in our garden, and carrots came up," said the Englishman.

"Oh," said Pat. "I set an acre of turnips last year in that field over there, and do you know what came up?"

"No," replied the Englishman.

"Mike Murphy's old black donkey, and ate them all," answered Pat.

Motes and Beams.

George Ade, over a cup of afternoon tea with a group of cynical bachelors at the Chicago Athletic club, said:

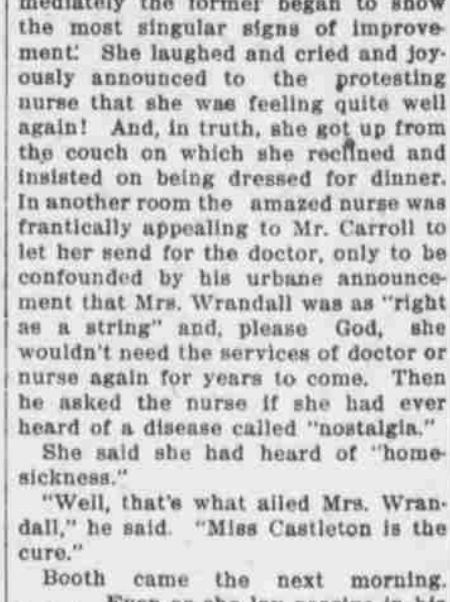
"Married men declare that their wives can't keep a secret, but these men themselves are just as bad."

"A married man buttonholed me in the billiard room an hour ago and told me a frightful scandal."

"Don't let this go any further, George," he ended.

"No, certainly not," said L. "But how did you happen to hear it?"

"Oh, the wife, of course," he answered. "She's just like all women—can't keep a secret."



Vivian Found Herself Looking Into the Face of Hetty Castleton.

extended her hand. "So glad to see you back again, Miss Castleton. Come and see me. Give my love to Sara."

She took her departure in some haste, and in her heart she was rejoicing that she had not succeeded in making a fool of herself by confessing to Sara that she had said unkind things about her to Brandon Booth.

Hetty resumed her seat in the broad French window and stared out over the barren treetops in the park. A frightened, pathetic droop returned to her lips. It had been there most of the day.

In Sara's boudoir, the doors of which were carefully closed, three persons were in close, even repressed conference. The young mistress of the house sat propped up in a luxurious chaise-loungue, wan but intense. Confronting her were the two men, leaning forward in their chairs. Mr. Carroll held in his hand a number of papers, prominent among them being three or four telegrams. Booth's face was radiant despite the serious matter that occupied his mind. He had reached town early in the morning in response to a telephone message from Carroll announcing the sudden, unannounced appearance of Hetty Castleton at his office on the previous afternoon. The girl's arrival had been most unexpected. She walked in on Mr. Carroll, accompanied by her maid, who had a distinctly sheepish look in her eyes and seemed eager to explain something but could not find the opportunity.

With some firmness, Miss Castleton had asked Mr. Carroll to explain why the woman had been set to spy upon her every moment, a demand the worthy lawyer could not well meet for the good and sufficient reason that he

"I think she knows all that, Brandon. As I said before, wait! And now, Mr. Carroll, I have this to say to your suggestion: I for one am relentlessly opposed to the plan you advocate. There is no occasion for this matter to go to the public. A trial, you say, would be a mere formality. I am not so sure of that. Why put poor Hetty's head in the lion's mouth at this late stage, after I have protected her so carefully all these months? Why, take the risk? We know she is innocent. Isn't it enough that we acquit her in our hearts? No, I cannot consent, and I hold both of you to your promises."

"There is nothing more I can say, my dear Sara," said Carroll, shaking his head gloomily, "except to urge you to think it over very seriously. Remember, it may mean a great deal to her—and to our eager young friend here. Years from now, like a bolt from the sky, the truth may come out in some way. Think of what it would mean then."

Sara regarded him steadily. "There are but four people who know the truth," she said slowly. "It isn't likely that Hetty or Brandon will tell the story. Professional honor forbids your doing so. That leaves me as the sole peril. Let that what you would imply, my dear friend?"

"Not at all," he cried hastily, "not at all. I—"

"That's all tommy-rot, Sara," cried Booth earnestly. "We just couldn't have anything to fear from you."

With curious inconsistency, she shook her head and remarked: "Of course, you never could be quite easy in your minds. There would always be the feeling of unrest. Am I to be trusted, after all? I have proved myself to be a vindictive schemer. What assurance can you and Hetty have that I will not turn against one or the other of you some time and crush you to satisfy a personal grievance? How do you know, Brandon, that I am not in love with you at this very—"

"Good heavens, Sara!" he cried, as she spoke.

"—at this very moment?" she continued. "It would not be so very strange, would it? I am very human. The power to love is not denied me. Oh, I am merely philosophizing. Don't look so serious. We will suppose that I continued along my career as the woman scorned. You have seen how I smart under the lash. Well?"

"But all that is impossible," said Booth, his face clearing. "You're not in love with me, and never can be. That's for your philosophy!"

At the same instant he became aware of the singular gleam in her eyes; a liquid, oriental glow that seemed to reflect light on her lower lids as she sat there with her face in the shadow. Once or twice before he had been conscious of the mysterious, seductive appeal. He started back at her, almost defensively, but her gaze did not waver. It was he who first looked away, curiously uncomfortable.

"Still," she said slowly, "I think you would be wise to consider all possible contingencies."

"I'll take chances, Sara," he said, with an odd buoyancy in his voice that, for the life of him, he could not explain, even to himself.

"Even admitting that such should turn out to be the case," said Mr. Carroll judiciously. "I don't believe you're in jeopardy, Sara. So we will dismiss the thought. Don't forget, however, that you hold them in the hollow of your hand. My original contention was, based on the time-honored saying, 'murder will out.' We never can tell what may turn up. The best laid plans of men and mice oft—"

Sara settled back among the cushions with a peremptory wave of her hand, revealing her white, exquisitely modeled arm almost to the shoulder. For some strange, unaccountable reason Booth's eyes fell.

"I am tired, wretchedly tired. It has been a most exhausting day," she said, with a sudden note of weariness in her voice. Both men started up apologetically. "I will think seriously of your plan, Mr. Carroll. There is no hurry, I'm sure. Please send Miss Wrاندall in to me, will you? Perhaps you would better tell Hetty to come in as soon as the Vivian leaves. Come back tomorrow afternoon, Brandon. I shall be much more cheerful. By the way, have you noticed that Dicky, out in the library, has been singing all afternoon as if his little throat would split? It is very curious, but today is the first time he has uttered a note in nearly five months. Just listen to him! He is fairly riotous with song."

Booth leaned over and kissed the hand she lifted to him. "He is like the rest of us, Sara, inordinately happy. A slight shiver ran through her arm. He felt it."

"I am so afraid his exuberance of spirit may annoy Vivian," said she, with a rare smile. "She detests vulgarity."

The men departed. She lay back in the chaise-loungue, her eyes fixed on the hand she had touched with his lips. Watson tapped twice on the door.

"Miss Wrاندall could not wait, ma'am," he said, opening the door softly. "She will call again tomorrow."

"Thank you, Watson. Will you hand me the cigarettes?"

Watson hesitated. "The cigarettes, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"But the doctor's orders, ma'am, begging your pardon for—"

"I have a new doctor, Watson."

"I beg pardon, ma'am?"

"The celebrated Doctor Folly," she said lightly.

CHAPTER XX.

Sara Randall's Decision.

"Now, you see what I mean, Brandon, when I insist that it would be a

mistake for you to marry me," said Hetty in a troubled voice. "I feel that Sara will not let me go."

"That's pure nonsense, Hetty," he said. "She wants you to marry me, I am positive." He may have thought his tone convincing, but something caused her to regard him rather fixedly, as if she were trying to solve an elusive puzzle.

He took her by the arm and raised her to her feet. Holding her quite close, he looked down into her questioning eyes and said very seriously:

"You are suspicious, even of me, dearest. I want you. There is but one way for you to be at peace with yourself; shift your cares over to my shoulders. I will stand between you and everything that may come up to trouble you. We love one another. Why should we sacrifice our love for the sake of a shadow? For a week, dearest, I've been pleading with you; won't you end the suspense today—end it now—and say you will be my wife?"

The appeal was so gentle, so sincere, so full of longing that she wavered. Her tender blue eyes, lately so full of dread, grew moist with the ineffable sweetness of love, and capitulation was in them. Her warm, red lips parted in a dear little smile of surrender.

"You know I love you," she said tremulously.

He kissed the lovely, appealing lips, not once but many times.

"God, how I worship you," he whispered passionately. "I can't go on without you, darling. You are life to me. I love you! I love you!"

She drew back in his arms, the shadow chasing the light out of her eyes.

"We are both living in the present, we are both thinking only of it, Brandon. What of the future? Can we foresee the future? Dear heart, I am always thinking of your future, not my own. Is it right for me to bring you—"

"And I am thinking only of your future," he said gravely. "The future that shall be mine to shape and to make glad with the fulfillment of every promise that love has in store for both of us. Put away the doubts, drive out the shadows, dearest. Live in the light for ever. Love is light."

"If I were only sure that my shadows would not descend upon you, I—"

He drew her close and kissed her again.

"I am not afraid of your shadows. God be my witness, Hetty, I glory in them. They do not reflect weakness, but strength and nobility. They make you all the more worth having. I thank God that you are what you are, dear heart."

"Give me a few days longer, Brandon," she pleaded. "Let me conquer this strange thing that lies here in my brain. My heart is yours, my soul is yours. But the brain is a rebel. I must triumph over it, or it will avail in wait for a chance to overthrow this little kingdom of ours. Today I have been terrified. I am disturbed. Give me a few days longer."

"I would not grant you the respite, were I not so sure of the outcome," he said gently, but there was a thrill of triumph in the tones. Her eyes grew very dark and soft and her lips trembled with the tide of love that surged through her body. "Oh, how adorable you are!" he cried, straining her close in a sudden ecstasy of passion.

The doorbell rang. They drew apart, breathing rapidly, their blood leaping with the contact of opposing passions, their flesh quivering. With a shy, sweet glance at him, she turned toward the door to await the appearance of Watson. He could still feel her in his arms.

A drawing voice came to them from

the vestibule, and a moment later Leslie Wrاندall entered the library, pulling off his gloves as he came.

"Hello," he said glitzy. "I told that fellow downstairs it wasn't necessary to announce me by telephone. Silly arrangement, I say. Why the devil should they think everybody's a thief or a book agent or a constable with a subpoena? He knows I'm one of the family. I'm likely to run in any time. I told him, and—Oh, I say, I'm not butting in, am I, Miss Castleton?"

He shook hands with both of them, and then offered his cigarette case to Booth, first selecting one for himself. Hetty assured him that he was not to drop, sheer profligacy on her part in view of his readiness to concede the point without a word from her.

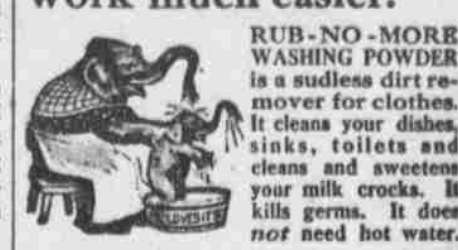
"Nipping wind," he said, taking his stand before the fireplace. "Where is Sara? Never mind, don't bother her. I've got all the time in the world. By the way, Miss Castleton, what is the latest news from your father?"

"I dare say you have later news than I," she said, a trace of annoyance in her manner.

TO BE CONTINUED

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